

**The Early History of King's Chapel: Understanding Our Past as We
Move into Our Future**

Mark 1:16-20 - Jesus said to them, "Follow me..."

When this church was searching for a new minister just a few short years ago, the summary description of King's Chapel sent out by this congregation was to this effect:

King's Chapel is Anglican in worship style, Christian Unitarian in theology, and Congregational in governance.

Three ways of being – Anglican, Unitarian *and* Congregational. No other church in the whole world is like King's Chapel, utterly unique.

And what do these three descriptors mean - Anglican in worship style; Christian Unitarian in our understanding of God; Congregational in how we make decisions?

What's the history behind this church, founded in 1686, begun as the English *King's* Chapel, which 100 years later became the very first Unitarian Church in the New World?

We'll be exploring these questions over the next several months – looking at our history as we move into our future.

Today is the kick off of a multipart study we welcome you to join – in book groups starting this Wednesday night; in worship again next Sunday, celebrating communion in the style used in Europe's first Unitarian Church; and in special programs we'll offer in April and May. Today you get a small taste – I hope it whets your appetite for more.

Because our history is fascinating – enmeshed in the ways the world in the 1600s and 1700s was changing radically. Just as our church today is enmeshed in a changing world.

My thesis is this: our history and how the church navigated changing times 200 years ago can teach us how to navigate all the changes today, including the worst we face – a world torn apart by religious differences.

In the 1600s bloody wars were being fought over changing religious beliefs, too, as Europe radically re-thought religion – Protestants splitting from Roman Catholics, debate over whether everyone had to adhere to only one orthodox view. Not so different from today.

Views of government also were being rethought in the 1600s and 1700s, with top down monarchies challenged, and revolutions fought. In Boston, a new fledgling democracy had to sort out the limits to their new freedoms.

Should there be one state religion, as there always was in Europe, and even as it had been at the founding of Boston, when all residents had to attend the Puritan church. Did the freedom *to vote* in a democracy also usher in freedom *of religion*, for the very first time?

Finally, there was a revolution of thought occurring -- following the Dark Ages and the Renaissance came the Enlightenment, the triumph of reason and learning, printed books and education accessible to many more. In Boston we'd already built the Boston Latin School next door, and Harvard had been founded to educate ministers.

And at the fulcrum of all this change was King's Chapel: at the crossroads of changing views on religion, government, and each person's ability to think for him or herself.

And they found a way – as today our warring world needs - to honor tradition and religion while embracing free thought and difference.

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There are several excellent resources for the study of King's Chapel history, especially its first hundred years, from 1686-1787. The greatest detail will come from the three volume Annals, written by our forebears and found in both our Library and our Archives. The two shorter, more easily accessed resources, are these, both available to you.

The first is a short history by Andre Mayer, published by us in 1976; copies are available to all of you after the service, at coffee hour. The

second is the series of four lectures given in 1993 by our ministers Charles Forman and Carl Scovel, available on the web.

Today I want to briefly come at our history from two angles: First, historically, the three key points on the timeline that shaped us. And second, today's result: some initial thoughts about what it means to be Anglican in worship style, Unitarian in theology, and Congregational in governance.

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On the historical timeline, three points are key:

In 1686, when King's Chapel was formed in the British colony of Boston, its minister and members were *not* welcomed.

King's Chapel is built on this graveyard because no one in Boston would sell land to King's Chapel; finally the English Governor just took a portion of this public graveyard and gave it to the church.

Boston had been founded by "Puritans" who wanted a "Pure" Christian religion, and had left England precisely to get away from the King's Church. Puritans wanted to create from America's wilderness a new city on a hill, which would shine out into the world, showing how Christians could really live in virtue. They initially banned any other kind of religion – Baptists, Quakers and others – who might mar their purity. By 1686, some other religious traditions were represented in the colony, but having the King's Church arrive, was an awful blow to the Puritan founders of Boston.

Puritans favored simplicity in worship rather than the prayerbook used at King's Chapel, which Puritans deemed too close to the Roman Catholic mass on which it had been modeled. Indeed, the Church of England had been formed only when English King Henry the VIII split from the Roman Church over Henry's desire to divorce, and the English prayerbook had been crafted from the mass as a way to breach the differences, and bind people together under one way of thought. Anglicans called it the middle way, between Catholicism and Protestantism. Puritans would have none of it.

Boston's Puritans also hated the Anglican and Roman religious hierarchies and their pomp – bishops who had to be obeyed, and rich liturgical gowns. Members of King's Chapel were vilified here in Boston as believers in "Popery."

In England during this period, as monarchies came and went amidst warfare, the country shifted swiftly back and forth from Anglican to Catholic and back again, and for a short time was Calvinist under Cromwell. Both in England, and in the New World, through these experiences of religious discrimination, members of King's Chapel came to understand why toleration of other religions could be important.

Puritans in Boston learned the lessons, too. On Easter Morning, the English Royal Governor seized the keys to the Puritan Old South Meeting House on Washington Street and forced Old South to share space with King's Chapel. The Governor then grabbed this cemetery upon which to build a small Anglican church, and by 1754, the powerful of the city worshipped in this beautiful building, an astonishing work of architecture for the time.

All of us in Boston, on all sides, early in our history of this country, experiencing the abuses of religious power.

But power shifts. So the second key point in our history timeline comes at the American Revolutionary War. Most members of King's Chapel had had to flee, having earlier identified themselves as Tories, loyal to the English King. When the war ended with England's defeat, it seemed obvious that no English minister would choose to come lead King's Chapel, now renamed "the Stone Church."

No more than a dozen families were still members; times were dire. On the brink of having to close with so few members, Carl Scovel writes, Church leader and Senior Warden Dr. Thomas Bulfinch "decided to find a *minister* who might then find a *congregation*."

After some candidates turned him down, Bulfinch recruited a recent graduate of Harvard Divinity School, James Freeman, to come read the prayers from the prayerbook.

Freeman agreed, so long as certain sections were omitted, including the prayer that damned to hell all who could not uphold the creed, the Athanasian Creed. With little ado, this request was granted, along with dropping prayers for the King.

Freeman and his congregation's leaders -- a changed group now, all children of the Revolution -- knew the works of writers like John Locke, who argued that people could use their reason to think and doubt, could by their own acts choose how to live. Salvation did not simply rise or fall on *believing* the right thing; one's virtue was based more on how they acted than what they believed.

Yet by making this prayerbook language change, neither Freeman nor King's Chapel meant to break from the newly forming Episcopal Church, successor of the Church of England in America. Perhaps they thought they were reflecting prevalent thought of the time, in the new world. Freeman had not yet been ordained, and he and this church both intended that he'd be ordained in the Anglican tradition once the Episcopal Church was established in America.

James Freeman was successful in attracting new members to King's Chapel, but he came to be uncomfortable with more parts of the prayerbook, particularly those based on religious notions of the Trinity. This is how we came to be the first Unitarian Church in the New World.

The Trinity is a formulation about God that speaks of a Triune God -- the three -- God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit -- who are both separate and indivisible. This formulation was best known in the Nicene Creed, based on work done by group of bishops who had met in Nicea, in what is now Turkey, in the 300s.

Emperor Constantine had conquered the Roman Empire, converted to Christianity, and wanted a united empire. Knowing that these still early Christians still had many different theories about who Jesus was -- a man, an angel, or God -- Constantine insisted an agreement be hammered out, and all who disagreed would be branded heretics. The Nicene Creed resulted.

Two core principles of the Creed were that Jesus was equivalent to God, and that Jesus had existed from the beginning of time with God, rather than only being born of Mary.

James Freeman had just finished his studies of the Bible and church history, so knew that this formulation about God and Jesus is never explicitly stated anywhere in the Bible, and that many references to Jesus in the Gospels actually seem to cut against the Trinitarian view.

Freeman's own understanding was that there was One God, Jesus was God's son, but Jesus was lower and different from God, perhaps like an angel, a messenger from God. Later, Freeman moved to a belief that Jesus was a man through whom God had acted.

Either of these views, though, was centered on there being only One God, not a Trinity, a view that later became known as Uni-tarian (One God), as distinct from Tri-nitarian (Three).

Freeman concluded that as a conscientious Christian – a follower of Jesus -- he'd need to leave his post at King's Chapel because he could not continue to read prayerbook language he found untrue. He could not continue to pray *to Jesus*, as if Jesus were equivalent to God.

But rather than just leave, Freeman was encouraged to share his views with the congregation. Freeman preached his view of One God, and Jesus as God's own son, assuming that these sermons would be his last. But the congregation listened carefully and concurred!

Freeman then proposed changes to the prayerbook, based on a liturgy used by English Unitarians, deleting references to the Trinity, and basing all language in the book on "the holy Scriptures." By vote many, though not all of Freeman's suggested changes, were adopted.

Members agreed not to pray *to Jesus*, but still wanted to pray *through Jesus* to God, because Jesus was the one who'd brought them closer to God.

Their goal, as stated in their Preface to the new prayerbook of 1785, was that no Christian could take offence: "The Trinitarian, the Unitarian, the

Calvinist, the Arminian will read nothing in it which can give him any reasonable umbrage. God is the sole object of worship in these prayers.”

At this point two key historical points had occurred: the beginning of King's Chapel as a vilified Anglican church in a land of Puritans; and then 100 years later, the choice of James Freeman, and his Unitarian views, ushering in a congregational vote to amend portions of the Church of England prayerbook.

The third key event was forced because of Freeman's ordination. Because Freeman still had not been ordained a minister, he could not offer communion. Members at this church had not received it in years. Twice Freeman applied to men who called themselves bishops of the new Episcopal Church being formed in America, but neither would ordain him, because of Freeman's changes to the prayerbook and Unitarian beliefs.

King's Chapel staunchly continued to support Freeman, arguing that in order to be a fit Episcopalian minister, all Freeman should need to affirm was this: “a general declaration of *Faith in the Holy Scriptures.*” The Bible was central.

But as to creeds and doctrines, said the congregation, the bishops should leave Freeman “and those under his pastoral Care, *to God and their consciences.*” Reason, conscience, the Bible and God, should be enough. (Scovel, 43).

To the Bishops of the Anglican tradition this claim by King's Chapel was astounding. Under the Episcopal tradition – with the “episcopacy” of hierarchical bishops – no individual congregation can change the prayerbook! Those changes would need to go through the hierarchy of the Church, all its bishops. And a congregation certainly can't ignore the “creeds”, including the Trinity, doctrines which had been in place for 1400 years as orthodoxy.

Relying on people's own consciences as to how to believe in God would be chaos

And then there was this thought, too: if King's Chapel were going to move away from Episcopal teachings, its membership would have to forfeit its beautiful building to the real owners, the Episcopal hierarchy. That was the surmise of Trinity Church's rector, the nearest Boston Episcopal Church.

For Freeman and this church, after several years of waiting, and continued application to the Episcopal bishops, members of King's Chapel determined that they could act by their own consciences, if consistent with the Bible. They would stay Episcopal, they declared - they re-named themselves the First Episcopal Church of Boston -- but they would ordain Freeman themselves, by their own vote.

This move clearly underscored King's Chapel as a church with a democratic governance structure, and therefore "Congregational" - the congregation has the power to ordain.

This was quite radical - indeed, even churches in Boston who call themselves "Congregational" - the old Puritans - didn't think they could ordain a minister by solely one congregation's vote. Ordination was considered so important that the candidate for ministry would need to be questioned and voted upon by a community of congregational churches - one church alone could not ordain a minister.

But King's Chapel did. It now was clearly independent, as it has remained: Unitarian in theology, congregational in governance, and Anglican in its style of prayerbook worship, albeit with an edited version, and with freedom of thought for all who enter here - what we call freedom of pulpit and pew.

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One final thought, as we look now to our future.

Rev. Carl Scovel has said that King's Chapel hasn't so much "kept" the old prayerbook, as the old prayerbook has "kept" us.

"Kept" this church, in the sense we pray, "May the Lord bless you and *keep* you", meaning may God sustain and protect you.

The prayerbook has “Kept us” as in the sense that the “Keep” of a castle is the safe, inner core of the castle, the most fortified place to which a castle’s inhabitants could retreat when under attack.

The prayerbook has “kept us” sustained in worship, with an ordered worship that always brings us back, week after week, to who we are and *whose* we are.

We have an ordered worship that contains a confession, admitting where we’ve failed, and an assurance that we’ve been forgiven, week after week.

An ordered worship that always includes three lessons from the Bible, that always contains psalms of thanks and praise to God, that always contains prayers and music, that always contains a sermon, hopefully to shed some light.

This prayerbook has “kept” King’s Chapel centered on the Bible and God. Even when we have edited the Prayerbook, as we have often, we have kept words that were from the Bible.

After the American Revolution, we edited out old Church of England prayers for the King, edited out the creed that said everyone must believe in the Trinity or go to hell, but never edited out phrases that were directly from the Bible, or the core of our prayerbook service, which is unequivocally focused on God, Jesus and Bible.

And when arguing for the ordination of their minister to the Episcopal bishop, King’s Chapel said that the central thing its minister must affirm was faith in the Bible.

We say the prayerbook has “kept” King’s Chapel. I think it has “kept” us Christian, and Biblical, with a commitment to dig deeply into what those mean, to question and think and probe, and then, to act it out in the world.

When we say we’re Anglican in style of worship, Unitarian in theology and Congregational in Governance, the prayerbook has kept us Christian

and rooted in the Bible, when other Unitarians have not been. But also wide open with tolerance for the many other ways others honor the Holy.

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For our warring world today, there is so much to learn from this history that we are heir to.

We: rebels *and* traditionalists, free thinkers *still rooted* in the Bible, a discriminated against minority who became a powerful elite who were toppled in revolution, who having been on both sides of religious discrimination, ultimately committed to freedom of religion and conscience and democracy. The hope for the world!

Followers? What does it mean?

Freeman – stating what he thought it meant to follow Jesus, even if it'd cost him his job.

This congregation – stating what they thought it meant to follow Jesus, even if they had to go their way alone.

All courageous followers, in whose steps we seek to follow, too.